

Russ Ewing, TV news reporter who convinced more than 115 suspects to turn themselves in, dies at 95

By [Antonia Noori Farzan](#)

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The two suspects were holed up in an apartment on the South Side of Chicago, barricading themselves with automatic weapons and two terrified hostages. Earlier on that cold November day in 1976, the duo had fired shots at police after being busted in the middle of a robbery at a currency-exchange office, then fled to a nearby apartment and forced their way in. Now, hundreds of officers surrounded the building, and the standoff seemed likely to end in gunfire. One of the robbers, James Shelton, knew exactly whom to call.

“I asked for Russ Ewing,” he [told Parade magazine](#) nearly two decades later, after getting out of prison. “I’d seen him on TV.”

Ewing, a television news reporter who would ultimately get [more than 115](#) wanted criminals to turn themselves in to law enforcement, had developed a reputation for being a trusted mediator between suspects and police. Shouting up the stairs from the first floor of the building, he slowly talked the men into putting their guns down, telling them that even spending 15 years in prison was better than dying. Eventually, the gunmen agreed to walk out with him and surrender.

“In something like this, you’ve just got to gamble,” Ewing [told the Chicago Tribune](#) afterward. “You take your chance, and if it works out, you’re a hero. If not, you’re dead.”

Over the course of more than three decades at WMAQ-NBC 5 and WLS-ABC 7 in Chicago, Ewing often put his own life at risk to negotiate with murderers and hostage-takers. Many of those suspects chose to turn themselves in to him because they feared being harmed while in police custody, according to the [Chicago Sun-Times](#). The newsman would photograph them before they surrendered, so they would have evidence that they hadn’t already been roughed up before they arrived at the jail.

“He would give them the dignity of a righteous surrender,” Marijane Placek, an assistant public defender, [told the Tribune](#) in 1995, “and they wouldn’t be abused or mistreated.”

On Tuesday, Ewing died of complications from bladder cancer at his home in Paw Paw, Mich., Patricia L. Arnold, a longtime friend and former colleague, told the [Tribune](#). He was 95. His wife, Ruth, died in 2004, and he had no immediate survivors, according to the paper.

Longtime Chicago television journalist Russ Ewing passed away tonight at age 95, in his home in Paw Paw, Michigan. I...

Posted by [Ken Bedford](#) on [Tuesday, June 25, 2019](#)

Born on the South Side of Chicago, Ewing was orphaned as a young child and raised by relatives. He [told Parade](#) in 1995 that he dreamed of being a commercial pilot, but ended up working as a Chicago firefighter instead. Also an accomplished jazz pianist who could reportedly [play any tune by ear](#), he cashed in on his musical talents as a teenager but grew tired of the late-night club scene.

“I didn’t smoke, I didn’t drink, I didn’t like nightlife, so after awhile, I said, ‘This isn’t for me,’ ” he explained, [according to ABC 7](#).

Later, he found himself drawn to journalism, [the Tribune reported](#). While still working as a firefighter, he wrote articles criticizing the fire department for the Chicago Defender, the city’s influential African American newspaper. In 1964, he made a career change, becoming a courier at local NBC affiliate WMAQ. When a reporting job in the newsroom opened up several years later, he jumped on it.

From the start, Ewing’s intimate knowledge of the city, and his own experience playing in the South Side’s housing projects as a child, helped him build trust with people who might otherwise be unlikely to open up to a reporter. “He had the ability to relate to people, especially in the black community,” Jim Stricklin, a former colleague, told the [Sun-Times](#). “They knew him and respected him.”

In 1969, still fresh on the job, he learned that he had a knack for defusing difficult situations. Ewing had shown up to cover a standoff at the Robert Taylor Homes, a notorious housing project on the South Side of Chicago, where a mentally ill man was holding his mother and several children hostage.

“The cops couldn’t get him out, so I said, ‘Let me see if I can talk to the guy,’ ” Ewing later [told](#) the Associated Press. “He recognized me and I talked to him for a few minutes, and he came out peacefully.”

Over time, Ewing became known for his soothing voice, calm presence and straightforward nature. By 1992, he told the AP, so many suspects wanted to surrender to him that he was [too busy](#) to deal with anyone who wasn’t a murderer. One public defender later [speculated](#) that though suspects initially began calling Ewing because police officers on the South Side had a reputation for abusing the people they arrested, surrendering to the reporter came to be something of a fad, and a way for some criminals to gain notoriety.

Though initially skeptical, police came to welcome Ewing’s involvement. In 1982, Lt. John Seamans, the head of the Chicago Police Department’s hostage negotiating unit, [told](#) the Tribune that he refused to authorize Ewing to meet with hostage-takers since the reporter wasn’t properly trained and could put both himself and the hostages in danger. A decade later, however, the department had come to see Ewing’s unconventional role in a different light.

“Russ is very helpful to me and my police detectives by bringing people in and saving us manpower,” John Stibich, the chief of detectives for the Chicago Police Department, [told the AP](#) in 1992. “And, we’re not getting hurt trying to arrest them. I’ll take anything to get murders off the streets.” It was up to Ewing to make sure he didn’t get into a dangerous situation, Stibich added, noting that the reporter had “good common sense.”

Longtime [@ABC7Chicago](#) reporter Russ Ewing, who was well-known for his ability to convince crime suspects to surrender peacefully to police, dead at age 95: <https://t.co/CrVEbIUdFE> pic.twitter.com/O8T34bmsYH

Dealing with fugitives accused of committing violent crimes could certainly get dicey. In an oral history for the [The HistoryMakers](#), a site collecting the stories of prominent African Americans, Ewing recalled that he once went to pick up a suspect who was hiding out in an abandoned building in Gary, Ind., after killing two people. He found the man sitting on an old couch with a half bottle of Jack Daniel's whiskey and .357 magnum handgun. The accused murderer, who knew he was headed to prison, told Ewing that he just wanted to shoot his gun one more time before he went back. Then, he started firing at the ceiling.

"I looked at him, and I said, 'That looks like fun,' " Ewing remembered. "He said, 'Yeah.' I said, 'Let me try it.' He handed me the gun and I fired three shots up in the ceiling. I was trying to get rid of the bullets. I didn't care nothing about shooting up into the ceiling. I just wanted to make sure he didn't have any more bullets. And I said, 'You got some more bullets? We can do that some more.' "

To Ewing's relief, the man said he was out. After chatting awhile, he allowed Ewing to bring him to the police station.

Typically, journalistic ethics prohibit reporters from intervening in ways that would alter the outcome of a story. But in a 1982 [interview](#) with the Tribune, Ewing dismissed those concerns.

"I've been criticized by those in the critic's chairs, but I've been applauded by the general public," he told the paper. "And I play to the gallery. So to hell with the experts. And until I fail I'll keep on doing what I do."

Ewing also candidly [admitted](#) that his daring exploits were good for ratings. A former colleague, Frank Mathie, [told the Tribune](#) that the newsman wasn't above self-promotion: He would walk into the police station with his arm tightly wrapped around the suspect, so that rival TV stations couldn't crop him out of their shots. He also eventually fulfilled his dream of being a pilot by getting his own plane, and would fly to pick up suspects who were on the run.


Though best known for escorting wanted criminals into custody, Ewing also covered weighty topics such as discriminatory lending practices at urban banks and went undercover as an inmate to report on conditions in the Cook County Jail, which won him one of the nine Emmys he would receive over the course of his career.

He wrote a book, "[Buried Dreams](#)," about John Wayne Gacy, later [recalling](#) that he got the serial killer to open up by bringing him chicken sandwiches for lunch everyday during his first murder trial. Gacy, in Ewing's retelling, really hated the bologna sandwiches that were served in jail, and eventually told Ewing his life story.

At the age of 71, Ewing announced he was retiring from television, but he didn't stop fielding calls from people who wanted to surrender to police. In 1998, when he made a brief return as a special correspondent on Channel 5, he [told the Tribune](#) that suspects were still contacting him three years after he went off the air.

"I can't turn these people down if they call me," he said.

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